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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 002592

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [TH](#)
SUBJECT: THAILAND PROTESTS: A PAD PRIMER

REF: BANGKOK 02546 (PAD PROTESTS)

Classified By: DCM James F. Entwistle, reasons 1.4 (b, d)

11. (SBU) Summary: The People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) behind the ongoing street protests against PM Samak's government first surfaced in 2005 in reaction to growing discontent over the alleged corruption of then-PM Thaksin. It largely disappeared following the September 2006 coup that ended the Thaksin administration, only to reemerge in Thai politics on March 28 with the same leadership but fewer supporters and a more radical agenda. Since then, it has been an active, occasionally aggressive, daily force on the Thai political stage. The last 90 days of protests have halted Bangkok's infamous traffic on numerous occasions, temporarily seized a media outlet, and even displaced the Prime Minister on several occasions from his office. This primer is meant to serve as a guide to PAD, its leaders, and motives.

12. (C) Comment: Before the aggressive actions launched August 26 which led to arrest warrants for its leadership and left its future uncertain, PAD appeared to be transforming itself from a movement whose purpose was to combat Thaksin and his allies whenever they were perceived to be untouchable, to a political party with a simultaneous populist and royalist-nationalist bent, with megalomaniac Sondhi Limthongkul using it as his personal vehicle, much as Thaksin did with Thai Rak Thai. PAD's 2008 reincarnation largely abandoned its origins as a wide, loose coalition of the working class, royalists, and middle class Bangkokians seeking justice and increased transparency in government in a shift to anti-democratic principles and increasing association with the Queen's circle rather than the King alone. End Summary and Comment.

The Founders

13. (SBU) PAD was formally established on February 8, 2006 by a five-member committee: Sondhi Limthongkul; Major General Chamlong Srimuang; Phiphob Thongchai; Somsak Kosaisuk; and Somkiat Pongpaiboon.

--Sondhi: Educated at UCLA and Utah State, a former journalist turned media mogul whose holdings include the Manager Daily, a Thai-language newspaper, and the Manager Group, which contains multiple media outlets. Sondhi supported the 2006 coup against the Thaksin government, but later took a critical stance against the post-coup government following its appointment of former Thaksin administration

officials to the cabinet and the holding of elections in 2007. In June 2008, Sondhi delivered a speech on what he called "New Politics," calling for a parliament comprised of 70 percent appointed MPs and only 30 percent elected, a lower ratio than in any constitution since 1932, when the absolute monarchy was abolished; he also proposed enshrining the military's right to intervene in politics at will. Sondhi plays the key role in shaping the PAD message and political agenda.

--MGEN Chamlong: A former politician and military officer, and second most prominent PAD leader, Chamlong led the May 1992 protests against GEN Suchinda, which ended in the most recent bloodshed in the streets of Bangkok and the King's intervention to restore civilian-led government. While in the military, Chamlong was a leader of the "Young Turks" clique in the army in the 1980s behind several failed coups against perceived corrupt government/military leadership. He served for six years as governor of Bangkok and founded the now-defunct Phalang Dharma party, which gave Thaksin his first start in politics. A devout Buddhist and member of the controversial Santi Asoke sect of Theravada Buddhism, Chamlong claims to be celibate, vegetarian, and to have no worldly possessions (Note: Santi Asoke enforces a moral-based community that rejects materialism, consumerism, and questions the roles and actions of the RTG. End Note.) Chamlong supported the 2006 coup that overthrew Thaksin, his one-time protege. Chamlong plays the key role in determining the tactics and street movements employed by PAD against government authorities, as he did in 1992.

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--Phiphob: An activist since he served as Secretary for the University Student Federation of Thailand, Piphob is famous for his work with NGOs, including the Children's Foundation of Thailand, the Council of Socio-economic Consultants of Thailand, and the Committee for Democratic Advocacy of Thailand.

--Somsak: A leading figure in advocating the rights of state-owned enterprise (SOE) employees, Somsak is the Secretary of the Thailand's Federation of SOE Labor.

--Somkiat: A former professor of social development and an advocate for the poor, Somkiat serves as PAD's link to the academic community. He is considered to be a charismatic speaker and is a regular contributor to newspapers and magazines. Elected to parliament in the 2007 election as a Democrat Party MP.

Second tier leaders

14. (SBU) A group of Sondhi's former employees of Manager Media provide a second tier of leadership ready to take-over should the core founders be arrested or detained during the ongoing protests: Amon Amonrattananon (who led the NBT TV assault and is also subject to an arrest warrant); Sawit Kawwan, Samran Rotphet, Sarocha Phonudomsak, Phichi Chaimongkhon, Surachai Mai-ngam, Anchali Phairirat, Panthep Phuaphongphan, and Chindarat Charoenchaichana. Arrest warrants were also issued for Chaiwat Sinsuwong and Thoetphum Chaidee, PAD leaders in north and northeastern Thailand.

PAD's Origins: 2005-06

15. (SBU) PAD's origins lie in a 2005 weekly political TV talk show hosted by journalist and media mogul Sondhi Limthongkul. The show's fiery critique of the Thaksin administration resulted in it being dropped from public television and picked up by Sondhi's Manager Media's website, where the tone of the show turned even more controversial and anti-Thaksin. This transformation was rather ironic, since the Manager Group media outlets had been Thaksin's most fervent boosters

in the runup to the 2001 election which swept Thaksin into office, and Thaksin had rewarded Sondhi by directing state-owned banks to restructure/forgive the massive debts of Manager Group had incurred in the 1990s. Sondhi split from Thaksin once Thaksin failed to grant Sondhi ownership/control of a TV station with national reach.

¶6. (SBU) Sondhi's anti-Thaksin shows attracted increasing numbers of supporters with various agendas and formed the basis for the PAD's agenda. Sondhi sought to affiliate the PAD movement with support for the monarchy by having PAD supporters wear yellow, the color traditionally associated with King Bhumiphol; he eventually attracted more than 100,000 to his rallies. PAD's support base in 2006 consisted of middle to upper-class residents of Bangkok, then expanding to include the surrounding provinces, as well as poorer rural residents, particularly from the south. Prominent socialites and even secondary members of the royal family joined PAD's pro-monarchy efforts. Academics, students, and members of the Santi Asoke sect also made up a core portion of PAD supporters.

PAD reborn: 2008

¶7. (SBU) On March 28, 2008, the five founders of PAD gathered supporters in the auditorium of Thammasat University to rally against PM Samak Sundarvej, reemerging officially as a political force, separate from the official Parliamentary opposition led by the Democrat Party. Supporters united around the perception that PM Samak's People's Power Party (PPP) acted on behalf of Thaksin's banned Thai Rak Thai party and was focused only on amending the constitution to assist Thaksin, not attending to the country's real needs.

¶8. (SBU) Taking advantage of a joint Thai-Cambodian statement supporting the listing of the 11th century Khmer Preah Vihear border temple as a UNESCO World Heritage site and claiming that FM Noppadol had sold out the national interest, PAD

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leaders took to the streets and began a series of demonstrations on May 25 at Democracy Monument. PAD continued its rallies in similar format until June 20, when PAD marched in force to the Government House, setting up a large stage and camp site, and calling for Samak's resignation. The numbers of participants remained a fraction of what they had been in 2006, however, with a narrower and more aggressive agenda driven by Sondhi and Chamlong.

¶9. (SBU) PAD street actions were one of several pressure points against the Samak government, combined with actions by the Democrats in the House, the Senate, half of which was appointed, and the courts. PAD aggressive tactics, including pushing through police lines to reach the Government House compound, are thought to have blocked the Samak government's attempts to amend the constitution in Thaksin's favor.

¶10. (C) Democrat Party Secretary General Suthep told us in early August that he viewed Sondhi and PAD as eventual formal political rivals; PAD was positioned to compete as a populist, royalist-nationalist force that could take support away from both the Democrats and the Thaksin camp. Democrat Party deputy leader Kraisaak Choonhaven told us that Sondhi had made an indirect approach via relatives to sound him out about joining "his party," even though the PAD remains a movement, not a formal political party.

PAD now a polarizing force, seeking bloodshed?

¶11. (C) Sunai Pasuk, Human Rights Watch's Thai coordinator and a long-time critic of Thaksin, told us in early August that he now views Sondhi and the PAD as a greater threat to Thai democracy than Thaksin. He cited the July clash in Udon Thani in the Northeast, known as Thaksin country. Sunai

claims the PAD organized the rally as an intentional provocation, hoping to spark bloodshed and violence that could then be used to promote its agenda, including calling for renewed military action against the Samak government. Thaksin's supporters obliged, with the brother of a deputy Agriculture Minister using local radio and truck-borne bullhorns to goad local residents to attack the PAD rally, and offering a 30,000 baht bounty to anyone who "bloodied" the lead PAD speaker.

¶12. (C) Kraisak told us on August 26, the first day of the current standoff in Bangkok, that PAD leaders had freely admitted to him on the eve of their self-styled "final push" that they similarly hoped to spark a violent reaction from the police and force the military to intervene/remove the Samak government.

¶13. (C) In the latest round of protests, PAD supporters have also started wearing armbands and other items in light blue, a color associated with the Queen, seen by many in Thailand to support a more nationalistic approach on issues like the south and a more aggressive opposition to the Thaksin camp, including if necessary with military involvement. Stories that the Queen personally donated 50,000 baht (\$1,700) recently to the PAD are running through the Bangkok rumint mill. Arsa Sarasin, the King's Personal Private Secretary, emphatically rejected this link in an August 29 conversation with Ambassador; while acknowledging the protesters were attempting to associate with the palace, he stated: "It is not true. The King and Queen are not involved."

JOHN